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Epistolarity, Anticipation, and Revolution in Clara Howard

MICHELLE BURNHAM



In the critical hierarchy of Charles Brockden Brown's six published novels, *Clara Howard* has traditionally ranked dead last. While Brown's four so-called major novels have long been redeemed from aesthetic disdain and continue to receive increasing attention and acclaim, his last two novels are routinely bracketed off from this earlier work and described in derisive and dismissive terms, when they have not been ignored completely. Critics, moreover, seem to agree that of these two late epistolary romances, both published in 1801, *Clara Howard* is worse even than *Jane Talbot*.¹ From Mary Shelley's 1814 remark that *Clara Howard* is "very stupid" to Norman Grabo's 1981 characterization of it as "all breakdown; the only things left to collapse are the characters and our interest. And they do," critics have virtually delighted in condemning the book.²

Clara Howard's segregation within or exile from Brown studies has most often rested on the departure of its epistolary form from the Gothic mode of his earlier novels. But Brown's renunciation of the Gothic has also been consistently keyed to his abandonment of both his earlier radicalism and his bachelorhood. The oft-repeated narrative of Brown's life and career has him concede to a capitalist market economy and meet his future wife just as his fiction becomes domestic and sentimental. Written for a female audience, eponymously titled for its heroine, and classified as a domestic romance, the novel has been implicitly dismissed as a "woman's" book. And whether its writer is accused of selling out to a print marketplace controlled

by female consumers or submitting to domination by the bourgeois institution of marriage, Brown himself is repeatedly positioned as a version of the "feminized" heroes of *Clara Howard* and *Jane Talbot*, as a writer and man who succumbed at once to marriage, money, and sentiment. The standard account has thus marked *Clara Howard* as the effeminate beginning of Brown's simultaneous aesthetic and ideological decline.³

This biographical narrative has long been subtended by a literary historical one that routinely asserts Brown's role as an influential precursor to a national literary tradition brought to prominence by such later writers as Cooper, Poe, Hawthorne, Emerson, Melville, and Faulkner.⁴ Building on the now-classic argument by Nina Baym, Bruce Burgett suggests that the separate sphere ideology that has underwritten the institutionalization of American literature and literary criticism excludes not only women's texts, as Baym argues, but also male sentimental ones like *Clara Howard*.⁵ Indeed, only by disregarding or demeaning his last two novels can this long-dominant narrative of American literature be sustained and Brown's place in it maintained.

Brown's post-1800 fiction has thus become victim both to the masculinist and to the continuist terms of these two interlaced biographical and national stories. Even when critics have allowed Brown's later novels a place in their account of his career, for instance, they repeatedly struggle to fit them into a satisfyingly linear narrative. Surely the most extreme of these efforts is Grabo's (admittedly wishful) rechronologization of Brown's literary career—by proposing that *Clara Howard* must have been written before his other, better novels—in order to preserve a developmental narrative of progress. For a handful of other critics, Brown's epistolary romances become cast as flawed continuations of rather than radical departures from his earlier work.⁶ Attempts like these to make *Clara Howard* fit into the dominant account of Brown's development as a writer and traditional accounts of the development of American literary history, perhaps reveal most the ways in which it resists the central terms of those narrative emplotments. As a result, the novel has been variously ignored, despised or manipulated in order to preserve the coherence and continuity of the stories these narratives tell.

A smaller but growing body of criticism, however, is beginning to allow *Clara Howard* itself to change the terms of this history. Sydney Krause, whose seminal analysis of *Clara Howard* and *Jane Talbot* brought the novels their first sustained critical consideration, manages to accommodate them

within the reigning biographical and literary historical narratives only by sidelining the entire category of form. Krause assumes that Brown, on the verge of renouncing his unremunerative literary career, suddenly adopts a marketable sentimental mode and lazily reuses material from *Edgar Huntly* because his concerns “lay in other areas than in plotting.” What makes *Clara Howard* noteworthy for Krause is its “extension of the same basic investigation of the ‘moral constitution of man’ that concerned [Brown] in the first four” novels, its continued working out of the Godwinian ideas that had interested him and influenced his literary production all along. *Clara Howard* thus becomes a philosophical treatise on the limits of Godwinian disinterested benevolence, whose form hardly matters since Brown “could have used any of a variety of incidents to make his point.”⁷

The critical revaluation of sentimentality begun in the 1980s has allowed more recent critics to build on Krause’s welcome attention to the novel’s content, by taking into account as well its sentimental and epistolary form. James Decker, for instance, finds Brown additionally engaging Godwin’s theories on “mental mutability” precisely through his use of epistolarity. The novel’s exchange of letters illustrates how writing falsely fixes ideas that are for Godwin in a state of continual instability and flux. The emotional characters in *Clara Howard*—which Decker reads as a revision of rather than a reusing of *Edgar Huntly*—repeatedly confront earlier and inaccurate versions of themselves in their own letters, and experience “frustration over the inability of the Word to keep up with the Thought.” More recently, Burgett locates the novel’s sentimentality within the more specifically political contexts of republicanism and liberalism. In contrast to “the disembodied logic of republican self-abstraction,” liberalism depends on “a logic of embodiment that assumes the centrality of sexual difference to any republic.” Brown inverts the conventional gender dichotomy by making Clara reason and Edward sentiment but manages only to produce a “male complaint” whose criticism of gender dimorphism is paralyzed by its own dependence on it. For Burgett, *Clara Howard* sentimentally (and masochistically) succumbs to liberalism’s gendered separation of public and private spheres, but not before lodging a resistant republican critique of that order that stymies the novel’s attempts at resolution.⁸

Jared Gardner most dramatically revises the conventional plot of Brown’s ideological development by reading the novel not as an assent to but a rejection of liberal individualism that offers instead a new kind of political subjectivity based on the model of the anonymous periodical editor

and characterized by the disinterested presentation of multiple interests. Gardner argues that the epistolary form of *Clara Howard* allows its author to dispense with authority and autonomy in order to function more like the editor who "orchestrate[s] a complex nexus of voices and sources," not in order to privilege one or resolve the differences between them but "to suggest the possibility of multiple interpretations cohabiting the literary-political space of the seduction plot and of the nation." The editor thus represents an "alternative citizenship" that eschews the impoverished options of Republican and Federalist by, as Gardner puts it, refusing to choose. Gardner ultimately suggests that this editor function is occupied by Sedley (and his sister Mrs. Valentine), who emerges in the final pages as a new kind of "natural aristocrat" able to "organize the private, conflicting, and self-contradictory voices that surround him, not by force or will, but by careful distance and display, allowing all the voices to be heard in their turn and in their own terms so that all will ultimately find their proper place and end."⁹ Although Gardner brilliantly accounts for the antinovelistic texture of *Clara Howard*, his analysis imposes on it a resolution that, in my view, the novel itself rejects, and that overlooks the inconclusive deferral on which both Decker and Burgett remark.

While I share both Burgett's and Gardner's sense that *Clara Howard* is marked by a resistance to an emergent liberalism, my focus is on the way its epistolarity offers a politically charged representation of historical time.¹⁰ Both its letters and selves are marked by a fundamental interdependency that resists not only liberal individualism but also the linearity and closure of both novelistic and nationalist narrative. Once we take *Clara Howard's* cue in relinquishing the insistence on progression that the plots of Brown's life and literary production have historically demanded, the novel emerges as interesting and important in large part because its radically intersubjective epistolary mode generates and plays with new strategies of narrative anticipation and suspense that confound rather than exemplify an emergent liberal subjectivity. Furthermore, Brown's suggestive use of the word "revolution" in this novel points toward the more specifically historical and political concerns of these experiments with narrative timing. *Clara Howard* has been repeatedly associated with Brown's abandonment of his earlier, more radical political sensibilities and his turn toward bourgeois conservatism. Such an assumption must be revised, however, once we focus on the novel's use of narrative temporality to evoke and reflect on the anticipatory pleasures of revolutionary consciousness. It inseparably pairs the expectation that for

Ernst Bloch is such a fundamental characteristic of utopian thinking, with disappointment; it yokes together anticipation with failure. As such, despite what critics have described as its relapse into empty bourgeois moralism, this late fictional work betrays an ongoing fascination with a political and social revolution whose democratic promises and effects, according to Brown, remained unmet and unfinished. In *Clara Howard*, the revolution has always, and once again, not-yet-arrived.

The Proportionality of Perpetual Deferral

Despite critical assumptions about Brown's sudden shift to domestic concerns in *Clara Howard*, marriage and the role of money in romantic and marital matters are of course central to nearly all of his novels, from *Arthur Mervyn* and *Ormond* to *Edgar Huntly* and *Stephen Calvert*. Likewise, his novelistic interest in the letter form is hardly new. As Cynthia Jordan has noted, five of Brown's six published novels use an epistolary format. And a significant portion of Brown's unpublished or unfinished fiction is also epistolary, including such works as "A Series of Original Letters," the "Henrietta letters," "Jessica and Sophia," and the "Ellendale" novel. Even *Alcuin* has been described as "a long fictional dialogue in epistolary form."¹¹

What sets *Clara Howard* apart from so many of these other works, then, is clearly not its *use* of letters. But the novel does begin to break rank with many of these other texts in the narrative *effect* of its letters. Letters and the novel-in-letters have long been positioned as a privileged genre for the emergence of a modern, bourgeois subjectivity. Contemporary theories of epistolarity have tended to highlight the ability of letters to represent the modern, liberal subject, and to (re)produce desire through their exchange. Such psychological verisimilitude is evident in *Wieland* or *Huntly* or even "Jessica and Sophia," where letters seem to provide access to the interior lives and unconscious desires of their writers, and generate in turn a narrative suspense that Brown characteristically leaves incompletely resolved.¹² There is more than enough uncertainty, more than enough suspense, and more than enough irresolution in *Clara Howard*. But the book trades in what might be called a vertical epistolary effect for a horizontal one: it is not single individual subjectivities represented through the writing of letters that are central to this novel, but the intersubjective dependencies of selves represented through the exchange of letters over time. As in *Wieland* or

Huntly, letters evoke narrative uncertainty, but in *Clara Howard* they do so less on their own terms than because they rely on, respond to, and await other letters. The letters of others alter or even overturn the knowledge presumed by any individual letter writer, such that the meaning of any single letter, or the identity of any single character, becomes literally held in suspense by the ongoing succession of letters that make up the novel. As a result, characters cannot in a fundamental sense claim possession of their selves. The very form of Brown's novel nicely illustrates what Christopher Castiglia and Julia Stern, in a discussion of early American interiority, describe as the "anxiety that the 'self' may never be entirely self-owned."¹³ It is not that Brown's characters withhold some element of themselves from other characters or the reader, but that some portion of themselves is held up by the future.

Knowledge in Brown's narrative is invariably revised by another epistolary arrival that—because it is inevitably delayed, partial, or simply subject to change—in turn produces yet more uncertainty. *Clara Howard* has been described as utterly devoid of action, and in a sense it is a novel not about occurrences, but about anticipation. Its plot is structured around an endless series of delays and deferrals, beginning with a packet of letters that Edward Hartley narrowly misses receiving. The letters, from Edward's fiancée Mary Wilmot, arrived for him "just the same evening of the very day that poor Edward left here and went to town." Even when Edward finally learns, four months later, that the misplaced letters had been "mislaid through accident," their reception is further delayed since the packet had just been forwarded, "[n]ot an half-hour" earlier, to New York. Edward rushes off in pursuit of the letters, because "[t]he least delay was intolerable."¹⁴

The novel, which might be described as a flurry of inactivity, offers us scene after scene of such "intolerable delays." Once Edward finally reaches and reads the packet of letters, its contents repeat his own anxiety of anticipation. Mary's first letter, for instance, explains that the brevity of Edward's last note "roused my curiosity" and made her displeased by "your delay" (12). In a mirroring of Edward's own condition, she neither knows where Edward is nor receives the expected correspondence from him. More deferrals and delays, departures and pursuits, follow. Her next letter, which she "defer[s] writing till I have read your long letter," tells of the arrival of a man named Morton who has claimed for his own an inheritance she believed to be hers. Knowing that Edward was bound to her by "honour" but not by "affection" (55), Mary had consented to wed him only when her new wealth enabled

her, through their anticipated marriage, to rescue him from poverty. Morton's appearance therefore leads her to "rejoice" that she had put off their marriage by "a delay of half a year" (13). Because she is now poor again, she refuses to marry Edward and urges him to marry Clara instead. Mary departs for a secret location where she claims he will never find her, even if his "pursuit" and "inquiries" become "incessant and anxious" (16). And of course they do, less because Edward himself wants to locate Mary than because, as readers know by virtue of the novel's very first letter, Clara has refused to marry Edward until he finds Mary, and as long as Mary is "unmarried to another and unhappy" (7). The story is unable to progress in a conventional narrative sense, not only because Clara's logic of disinterested benevolence founders on its own ground, but because the status of the novel's three central figures is so dependent on the always undetermined status of each other. The characters in this novel are repeatedly pulled into and out of shape by their heteronomous relations with others.

The chain of letters that are exchanged between them mirror this indeterminacy and dependency. Because every letter leaves something unanswered or unresolved, the characters—like their readers—are compelled to pursue more information, to await the arrival of more letters. While letters and their writers go missing, and actions and decisions get deferred, Edward, Clara, and Mary spend most of their time anticipating the arrival of letters or each other. These repeated deferrals, of course, (re)produce desire through delay, a strategy evident in the novel's content as well as in its form. *Clara Howard's* romance plot awaits resolution and certainty just as its characters await the letters that never seem to deliver the resolution and certainty they promise. Virtually every single letter dramatically redefines, again and again, the relationship between the correspondents and their knowledge of each other. While Edward is absent in his search for the vanished Mary, for example, he and Clara exchange a series of letters that trace out an almost tortuous series of reversals. Edward declares himself in love with Clara; Clara retracts her commitment to him and insists that he marry Mary whether he loves her or not; Edward acquiesces and agrees to marry Mary but accuses Clara of indifference; Clara is insulted by his assumption and accuses Edward of misunderstanding her. Later, Edward renews his appreciation of Clara, and Clara renews her desire to marry Edward only, even later, to change her mind once again. By so fundamentally altering perceptions and assumptions, each successive letter forestalls conclusion and protracts suspense.

This pattern is in many ways consistent with the "discourse of interruptibility" that Sharon Harris locates in early American women's writing. Marked by the frequent interruptions of domestic life, women's literary texts, like their letters and diaries, are characterized by what Harris identifies as an associative rather than linear narrative pattern that resists the conventions of closure. Brown's own correspondence to his future wife Elizabeth Linn in the months prior to the publication of *Clara Howard* contain, in their typography as well as their substance, evidence of interruptive discourse. Brown records his annoyance at delays in his letters caused by interrupting visitors and, much more frequently, at delays between his letters caused by Linn's persistent refusals to write him back.¹⁵ While external interruptions of various sorts do cause delays in *Clara Howard*, the narrative's unusual quality of paralytic velocity stems more deeply from the complicated relations of interdependency between subjects who cannot claim the possession of their selves as wholly as they (or we) might like. Moreover, Brown's participation in a discourse identified largely with women might point toward the particular political complaints that underpin interruptive discourse, complaints that Brown may well have shared with American women who continued impatiently to await the Revolution's utopian fulfillment long after the Revolution was over.

The perpetual prolongation that characterizes both the romance plot and the exchange of letters that carries out that plot is supported by a logic of inverse proportionality that, as Clara describes it, is almost cruel in its effects. In one letter, Clara outlines the terms of this remarkable emotional economy, in which the feelings of Edward and Clara offset each other in such perfect proportions that they cancel out any possibility of understanding or satisfaction. "In your eyes," she writes to Edward, "my character was estimable *in proportion to* the reluctance with which I performed what was just. Your devotion to me was fervent *in proportion as* the performance of my duty was attended with *anguish and suffering!*" (25; first two emphases added). Clara is outraged that Edward enjoys her selfishness, and that he prevents her from enjoying her selflessness. The more pleasure she gains by sacrificing her happiness to Mary's, the more she displeases Edward. The more pain Clara feels at the thought of sacrificing Mary's happiness, the happier Edward is. She goes on to remark that "you exult *in proportion to* my misery. You revere me *in proportion as* my sentiments are mean and selfish! I am to be upbraided and despised, *in proportion to* the fulness of that enjoyment, which, the approbation of my

conscience, the sense of doing right myself, and of conferring good on others, has given me!" (25; emphases added). The emotional exchanges between Edward and Mary, like their epistolary exchanges, are such exact inversions of each other that their romance—like the narrative that describes it—cannot progress, despite the fact that it continually moves forward in time.

The number of reversals that take place in this series of letters is almost dizzying. As Cynthia Jordan describes it, in the "series of impassioned and hastily dispatched letters" that makes up the novel, "we have witnessed decisions and revisions which mere minutes have reversed, including reversals of sentiment within any given letter."¹⁶ When she receives no reply from Edward, Clara's tone shifts from accusation to regret, and when she finally learns that Edward has not written because he has fallen ill after benevolently rescuing a young woman from drowning, she relents altogether, renews her desire to marry him, and awaits with "agony" news from her father who has gone to retrieve Edward. As he recovers, Edward sends Clara only one brief missive, which accepts her change of mind but that also withholds any new information for her until they meet in person. It is not just that Edward fails fully to understand Clara or to see her clearly, but that Edward's perception of Clara inverts the terms of her own self-perception. By doing so, he seems to take Clara's very self, her understanding of who she is, away from her. He values precisely that in her which she most despises, and despises that which she values most. The more virtuously she behaves in her own eyes, the less virtuous she appears in Edward's. The less admirable she appears to herself, the more admirable she is to Edward. Moreover, as Clara's language emphasizes, these contested perceptions so perfectly counterbalance each other as to effectively forestall any progression.

Later in their correspondence, Clara once again describes the misunderstanding between herself and Edward in terms of inverse proportionality: "That which was selfish and base in my eyes, was praiseworthy in his. I passed for obdurate and absurd, *in proportion as* I acted in a manner which appeared to me generous and just" (107; emphasis added). Clara's use of the phrase "in proportion as" is notable not only for its repetition within this novel, but for Brown's use of it in other texts, always to describe a similar pair of offsetting pressures. In *Edgar Huntly*, for instance, Edgar begins his letter to Mary Waldegrave by describing an irresolvable tension between the accuracy of his representation and the

immediacy of his experience, explaining that "[i]n proportion as I gain power over words, shall I lose dominion over sentiments; in proportion as my tale is deliberate and slow, the incidents and motives which it is designed to exhibit will be imperfectly revived and obscurely portrayed." Edgar writes, as it were, on a kind of precipice between clarity and intensity. In "The Man at Home," the phrase is used to describe a similar narrative tension, this time between curiosity and knowledge: "Our curiosity is proportioned . . . to the shortness of the interval, and thus slightness of the bar between us and knowledge."¹⁷ Here the narrator explains that the intensity of our desire to know increases proportionally as we decrease the distance, or "interval," that separates us from the arrival at knowledge. It is of course precisely upon this anticipatory precipice or "interval" that Brown repeatedly positions his expectant readers. In both *Huntly* and "The Man at Home," Brown's use of this logic of inverse proportionality describes, much more explicitly than it does in *Clara Howard*, an aesthetics of narrative composition.

When critics complain that *Clara Howard* lacks action, or that its lack of a central narrator hopelessly fragments the novel, they miss the way in which the careful, if tormenting, proportionality of its epistolary exchanges accomplish precisely the kind of narrative anticipation and desire, over and over again, that those same critics praise in Brown's Gothic fictions.¹⁸ The narrative retracts as quickly and as definitively as it promises satisfaction or resolution. The sense of anticipation in the novel becomes routinized, practiced, almost exhausted by its own predictability. It calls to mind the pointless velocity of the fictional Peter Rugg, protagonist of postrevolutionary America's "most popular short story" and exemplar for Joyce Appleby of the early Republic's culture of frenzied anticipation. Rugg, who determines one night in 1770 to race to his Boston home ahead of the dark storm that is gathering behind him, remains decades later condemned perpetually to continue that fruitless journey, oblivious, like his sleepy counterpart Rip Van Winkle, to the enormous (non)changes that have taken place on the geopolitical landscape through which he blindly hurries.

Appleby's portrait of the postrevolutionary "first generation of Americans" attributes to them an increasingly individualist pursuit of wealth, success, invention, and passion. But her account recognizes as well that behind this liberal narrative of rapid progress, on "the darker side of American freedom in the half-century after Independence," are untold

stories of debt, poverty, failure, violence, and dispossession.¹⁹ *Clara Howard*'s frenetically stalled temporality offers a kind of dual telling of these two incompatible narratives, inviting early American readers to take masochistic pleasure in the repeated failure of their narrative (and political) expectations.²⁰ *Clara Howard*'s characters and readers both appear condemned, like Peter Rugg, energetically to repeat their determined but useless efforts to reach their desired destinations. After Clara relents and finally agrees to marry Edward, for example, she changes her mind after meeting Mary, and once again insists that "while Mary lives, and is not bound to another, I will never be to you any thing but Your friend" (109). Edward argues with her, and threatens to forsake civilization and court danger by traversing the unexplored American continent. But he, too, finally changes his mind and proposes, once again, to Mary, who once again turns him down. Edward refuses Mary's request to explain or "delay" her answer to him, and instead rushes off and falls ill with a fever. Mary's explanation does finally appear in a letter that is positioned chronologically out of sequence. There she declares, "My indifference, my aversion, *were proportioned to* that fervent love with which my heart was inspired by another" (120; emphasis added). She has, in the end, fallen in love with Sedley, her formerly rejected suitor. Her emotional reversal comes after discovering that the money claimed by Morton was actually given to her by Sedley, who in an act of selfless generosity was trying to make it possible for her to wed Edward.

At first glance, this new information about Sedley's character and Mary's engagement to him might seem all that the narrative needs to resolve the anticipation and suspense that have been in play from its very beginning. And yet the novel refuses this closure to end instead with yet more anxious uncertainty and delay. The news of Mary's change of heart, for instance, does not reach Edward until he has already forsaken both Mary and Clara. But even when it does reach him, deferrals persist. The final letter, addressed to Mary by Clara, writes in anticipation of both of their marriages, and wonders that Mary has insisted on a "delay" of her marriage to Sedley. This final delay must be seen as more than a mere "loose end" in Brown's narrative, for it was of course precisely such a marital delay on Mary's part that was prelude to the entire novel. Thus Mary's last gesture of deferral virtually returns us to the beginning of the novel. And even this final letter by Clara itself expresses a delay, for in it she promises to write later a full reply to Mary's letter. Therefore two

marriages, as well as continued epistolary correspondence, are promised beyond the ending of the novel.²¹

The narrative might be described as one of frenetic inactivity, a series of impasses en route to no destination. Yet *Clara Howard* is clearly not a novel about events that happen or develop or progress. It is a novel about assumptions and expectations that change, and that change so suddenly and frequently and dramatically that very little in the conventional sense happens at all. In fact, it is notable that the few concrete, material events that occur within the plot—such as Edward Hartley's two illnesses, or his determination to exile himself into the Western wilderness, or even his marriage to Clara—either go almost entirely undescribed or altogether fail to transpire. These failures follow from the characters' misrecognition of their fundamental interdependence, and of the interdependence of the present and the future. In *Clara Howard*, neither the self nor the present is in possession of itself.

In the penultimate letter, addressed to Edward, Clara expresses her worries about Edward's return to her during a violent storm. She knows he will proceed hastily (apparently unable to tolerate delay at the end any more than he was at the beginning) and will therefore be subject to the storm's dangers. She further notes that such dangers appear to be typical of America, which she describes as "a land of evils; the transitions of the seasons are so quick, and into such extremes. How different from the pictures which our fancy drew in our native land!" (146). The American climate, as Clara describes it, resembles the quick, extreme, and unpredictable transitions that have characterized her relationship with Edward Hartley and the narrative pace of *Clara Howard*. The privileged word for this particular narrative strategy in Charles Brockden Brown's fiction is *revolution*, a political phenomenon that shares with epistolarity the temporal mode of anticipation. Ernst Bloch argues that "every act of anticipating identifies itself to the utopian function," which accordingly "seizes on all possible substance in the surplus of" anticipation. Not only is this element of the "unarrived," this "forward dream," preparatory to revolution,²² but Bloch insists that "art retains its anticipatory function even after the revolution."²³ As Brown takes pains to remind us, *Clara Howard*'s expectant narrative economy has more than a little to do with the historical and political condition of postrevolutionary America, where citizens rush in frenzied pursuit of political possibilities that somehow appear to have been left far behind.

Revolution and Revolution and Revolution

Critics have remarked on the recurrence and power of the word "revolution" in other Brown novels, and on the formative role played by the American and French Revolutions in particular, in Brown's work.²⁴ The appearance of the word in *Clara Howard*, however, has gone unremarked, as if the novel's classification as sentimental, domestic, and romantic has somehow cut from view its engagement with historical and political matters. Yet the word revolution appears three times in the course of the text, all in the same central letter, where its tripled use suggests an intimate relationship between political, emotional, and narrative forms of revolution.

Twenty-six of the thirty-three letters that make up *Clara Howard* are exchanged between Edward Hartley and Clara Howard.²⁵ The most notable exception to these is the lengthy letter that appears after the initial series of letters between Edward and Clara. Addressed to Francis Harris, an otherwise unidentified recipient, this letter details the history of Mr. E. Howard and his relationship to Edward, providing readers with the background necessary to contextualize the relationship between the novel's two protagonists. In it, Edward describes Howard as a man whose youthful refusal to abandon the "giddiness of youth, and the fascinations of pleasure" (48) ultimately severs his romantic attachment to Clara Lisle, who then follows "the wishes of her family" (49) by marrying Howard's cousin. Howard subsequently settles in America, where he undergoes both moral and economic reforms before taking Edward Hartley under his wing, proposing "to be a father to me while living, and to leave . . . all he had to leave, to me, at his death" (49). When, many years later, his cousin dies, Howard embarks for England and renews his hopes for marriage to Clara. He finally returns to America with his new wife and her daughter, also named Clara. When his benefactor invites Edward to become both a partner in his newfound fortune and a member of his family by marrying his daughter, Edward responds with a profound sense of class anxiety. Edward thinks of himself, he explains, as "a *peasant*" (53), as "nothing more than an obscure clown, whose life had been spent in the barn-yard and corn-field, and to whose level, it was impossible for a being qualified and educated like Clara, ever to descend" (55). Because Clara Howard and her fortune occupy "an elevation in the social scale, to which I could scarcely raise my eyes" (54), the prospect of marriage to her appears "utterly incredible" (53).

Yet despite the intensity with which Edward experiences this class anxiety, he also acknowledges that such anxiety is inappropriate and unnecessary in the context of the newly independent American nation. However, his notions of "birth and rank," he explains, have been formed by "the medium of books" rather than by "any other of our external circumstances" (53). Therefore, although the term peasant, Edward argues, is "inapplicable to the tillers of ground in America," its Old World meaning and resonance persist in New World minds that, like his, have been trained on European books. Accordingly he "could never forget that my condition was that of a *peasant*, and in spite of reflection, I was the slave of those sentiments of self-contempt and humiliation, which pertain to that condition elsewhere, though chimerical and visionary on the western side of the Atlantic" (53). Because "[o]ur books are almost wholly the productions of Europe," assumptions and beliefs about class identity have been "modelled on a scale" that is, or at least should be, irrelevant in America—a scale, in fact, "which the *revolution* has completely taken away" (53). Edward finds himself invited to act one way (to pursue the social advancement promised by the democratic narrative) and condemned to feel another (rooted to his static prerevolutionary socioeconomic identity).

Although the American Revolution is acknowledged to have been a radical rejection of the social and political order of Europe, postrevolutionary Americans still find themselves subject to the hegemonic terms of Europe through the persistence of a social system that is ideologically inconsistent with political forms of democracy. America is no more independent or in possession of itself than the characters in *Clara Howard*. The social practices of courtship and marriage are accordingly complicated by this uncompleted revolution, and the tortured romance plot of *Clara Howard* is ultimately underwritten by these unresolved ideological tensions. Although Edward Hartley certainly subscribes to a felt rejection of the system of elitism, he behaves with deference toward elites like E. Howard. Try as he might to convince himself of "the futility of titular distinction . . . the capriciousness of wealth, and its independance [*sic*] of all real merit, in the possessor," he is unable to muster the requisite "confidence and self-respect" that such reflection should command (55). As Brown characterizes it here, although the American Revolution has literally happened, it has, in more fundamental ways, yet to take place. Americans like Edward Hartley are still awaiting the revolution, the arrival of its promises. Seen in this context, the constant shifts of fortune, prospect, sentiment, and plot that characterize the epistolary

correspondence of *Clara Howard* take on new meaning. Rather than flaws in structure or vision, these repeated reversals and deferrals now bear the marks of the confusion and "intolerable delay" prompted by America's incomplete revolution. Indeed, the unfinished story of courtship and romance that these letters tell comes to resemble narratologically the unfinished terms of that revolution.

Brown's own language suggests an association between the political revolution referred to by Edward and the novel's characteristic narrative economy of perpetual deferral. Edward confesses later in the long letter to Francis Harris that the disappearance of Mary Wilmot following the arrival and claim of Morton has perhaps been prompted by "[s]ome secret *revolution* . . . in the mind of my friend" (61; emphasis added). Edward suspects that Mary, who has now withdrawn any claim to his hand, has allied herself to Sedley, whom she had earlier rejected for Edward. This second use in the same letter of the word *revolution* employs the term more broadly, where it is defined simply as a "change of views" (61). The "revolution" Edward attributes to Mary, by freeing him of his duty to honor his contract with her, of course opens up new possibilities for him, much as the Revolution's new ideology has for America. But the evidence to confirm Mary's emotional revolution is just as lacking as any evidence to confirm that America's political revolution has changed the social reality of most Americans. Alexis de Tocqueville's portrait of American democracy takes occasional note of this element of delay in the social and political landscape of America, which "has, if I may so speak, a surface covering of democracy, beneath which the old aristocratic colors sometimes peep out."²⁶ If the characters in this novel are constantly stopped in their tracks, it is because they are attempting to negotiate just such a contradictory landscape. *Clara Howard*, a novel in which someone changes his or her mind on virtually every page, amounts to an endless succession of such incomplete and uncertain revolutions, each of which halts the narrative progress and continuity of the novel, repeatedly abandoning its readers to an always unfulfilled but infinitely renewable sense of expectation.

As it turns out, however, it is this anticipatory quality of revolution that most interests Brown. Momentarily and rather wishfully convinced that Mary has agreed to marry Sedley, Edward allows himself to imagine a union with Clara Howard, and rushes back to meet her for the first time. As he looks forward to this meeting, he remarks that

[m]en exist more for the future than the present. Our being is never so intense and vivid, if I may so speak, as when we are on the eve of some anticipated *revolution*, momentous to our happiness. Our attention is attracted by every incident that brings us nearer to the change, and we are busy in marking the agreement between objects as they rise before us, and our previous imaginations. (63; emphasis added)

This third reference to revolution in the Harris letter offers a suggestive modification of the term as well as a concise articulation of Brown's aesthetic formula in *Clara Howard*. Revolution is here associated with a specific kind of temporality, one that offers pleasure through the prospect of diminishing delay. It is no mistake that the scenario described by Edward above—in which ontological intensity increases *in proportion as* (to borrow Brown's own locution) epistemological uncertainty decreases—mirrors Brown's proportional formula for narrative anticipation. That formula is outlined most succinctly in the passage from "The Man at Home" where Brown explains that curiosity, desire, suspense build as the "interval . . . between us and knowledge" begins to diminish.

Significantly, there are two "intervals" specifically mentioned in *Clara Howard*. Both describe the lag in space and time that separates lovers from marital union. But while one of these intervals closes to offer a satisfying sense of narrative resolution, the other interval persists. And the difference between them is the American Revolution. The first appears in the history offered by Edward of the marriage between Howard and Clara Lisle. As we have seen, their anticipated union is canceled (or, as it turns out, deferred) in easy obedience to parental duty. Clara the elder marries on the basis of "generosity and pity, and not . . . love" (50), a decision that is almost applauded by Howard himself, who "was not attended with any anger or regret at her compliance with the prudent wishes of her family," and even approves "her choice of one infinitely more worthy than himself" (50). When the two meet again, after the death of Clara's first husband and after Howard's reform, "[t]he pair, whom so many years, and so wide an *interval* had severed, were now united" (51; emphasis added). The marriage, not incidentally, takes place in Europe.

The interval that separated E. Howard from the elder Clara is rather easily dissolved by their marriage. But a more formidable interval

separates E. Hartley from the younger Clara, whose American marriage never does take place. The American Revolution reportedly overthrew hierarchical for democratic structures of authority, a transformation frequently figured in the shift from arranged to affectionate marriages, and in the shift from obedience to parental duty to the pursuit of individual desire. But, as Edward Hartley insists, at the moment when he is first faced with the prospect of marrying Clara, the cultural terms of this revolution have not yet taken place in America, where hierarchical notions of class identity and authority persist. As a result, marriages are promised and anticipated and delayed, but they do not take place. Edward explains, as he contemplates the prospect of marrying Clara, that he "had been familiar with the names of nobility and royalty, but the things themselves had ever been shrouded in an awe-creating darkness. Their distance had likewise produced an *interval*, which I imagined impossible for me to overpass" (53; emphasis added). It is this interval, between the European past and the American future, between pre- and postrevolutionary ideologies, that Edward cannot overcome, and that repeatedly stalls the narrative progress of *Clara Howard* and its story of romance and marriage. Like that anticipatory interval described in "The Man at Home," this interval is the agent of perpetual narrative deferral. Edward faces not just the difficulty of choosing between Clara and Mary, between "passion and reason," or between desire and duty, but a paralysis brought on by the inconclusive terms of America's revolution. It is such moments of "anticipated revolution" that *Clara Howard* creates for its readers, as for its characters, over and over and over again through the narrative device of epistolary exchange. Just like the unfortunate but eternally hopeful Peter Rugg, the cast of *Clara Howard* go nowhere at great speed. Its narrative awaits resolution, just as Americans await the revolution that history told them had already happened.

Significantly, Brown charges American writers and publishers with at least some of the burden of completing that revolution, when he has Edward Hartley argue that American literature has failed to make the revolution real by failing to represent its radical possibilities for American readers. If *Clara Howard* is finally able only to report on and reproduce this revolutionary deferral, it may be because Brown himself was subject to the same ideological conflict that placed Edward Hartley in a repeating temporal "interval" that with a paralytic rapidity moves forward but does not progress, and in which both liberalism and democracy are held in a kind of headlong

suspense. *Clara Howard* and *Jane Talbot* have been repeatedly tagged as Brown's last attempts at fiction before turning his interests toward history. Fritz Fleischmann has suggestively argued that Brown's interest in and commitment to fiction persisted through and within Brown's later work. The temporality of Brown's fictional narrative in *Clara Howard*, which resembles the forestalled temporal progress of American political history, suggests additionally that Brown might also, in his fiction, have been writing history from the very beginning.

Notes

1. Steven Watts, for example, describes *Clara Howard* as "a long step backward" in aesthetic terms, and "[w]ithout doubt . . . the weakest of all Brown's novels," while *Jane Talbot* moves beyond "mere sentiment to engage some interesting cultural issues." *The Romance of Real Life: Charles Brockden Brown and the Origins of American Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994), 134, 139. Norman S. Grabo calls *Clara Howard* "trivial and silly," "primitive," a "failure," and located "at the very bottom" in the hierarchy of Brown's work, "with *Jane Talbot* a mere half step higher." *The Coincidental Art of Charles Brockden Brown* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1981), 129, 142. W. M. Verhoeven, otherwise one of the few critics to treat seriously both late novels, nevertheless describes *Jane Talbot* as "the more mature of Brown's two epistolary novels." "'Persuasive Rhetoric': Representation and Resistance in Early American Epistolary Fiction," *Making America/Making American Literature*, ed. A. Robert Lee and W. M. Verhoeven (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 129 n. 18.
2. Shelley qtd. in Donald A. Ringe, "Historical Essay," *Clara Howard; in a Series of Letters (with Jane Talbot; a Novel)*, by Charles Brockden Brown, ed. Sydney J. Krause, S. W. Reid, and Donald A. Ringe (1801; Kent: Kent State UP, 1986), 454; Grabo 129.
3. See Warner Berthoff, "Brockden Brown: The Politics of the Man of Letters," *Serif* 3.4 (1966): 3-11, and Watts, who describes this shift in the most succinct terms when he writes, "On or about April 1800 Charles Brockden Brown changed" (131). It should also be noted that not all critics accept the commonplace claim that Brown abandoned fiction; see, for example, Fritz Fleischmann, *A Right View of the Subject: Feminism in the Works of Charles Brockden Brown and John Neal* (N.p.: Verlag Palm & Enke Erlangen, 1983), 121, 140. The language used to describe Brown's last novels frequently proves telling, as when Grabo remarks that Brown's last two novels "resemble those wavelets that beat against a seawall after the main wave has shot its strength" (143), and when Watts describes them as bourgeois tales about the "taming" of men by "morally willful female characters" (132).
4. Although the number of critical studies of Brown that posit and rely on such a narrative of influence are too many to cite here, a few representative samples follow. Grabo insists that Brown "anticipates, even prepares the ground for . . . Emerson and Thoreau and Poe" (184); for Watts, Brown foreshadows Emerson,

- Melville, and others (198–99); for Ringe, Brown's themes "reccho, in one way or another, in a considerable amount of subsequent American fiction" (*Charles Brockden Brown*, rev. ed. [Boston: Twayne, 1991], 115); and for Bill Christophersen, Brown "foreshadows" Cooper, Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, Faulkner, and James (*The Apparition in the Glass: Charles Brockden Brown's American Gothic* [Athens: U of Georgia P, 1993], 1–2).
5. Bruce Burgett, *Sentimental Bodies: Sex, Gender, and Citizenship in the Early Republic* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998), 131.
 6. Grabo 131. For Paul Witherington, they represent "the continuity of Brown's narrative forms, ideas, and tone" ("Brockden Brown's Other Novels: *Clara Howard* and *Jane Talbot*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 29.3 [Dec. 1974]: 257); for Fleischmann, they "continue to evolve themes that the earlier [novels] had developed" (77); for Ringe, they "carry forward at least some of the intellectual themes that Brown had been developing throughout his short career as a writer of fiction" ("Historical" 436); and for Watts, they mark "a critical stage in [Brown's] ideological development" (137).
 7. Sydney J. Krause, "*Clara Howard* and *Jane Talbot*: Godwin on Trial," *Critical Essays on Charles Brockden Brown*, ed. Bernard Rosenthal (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981), 186.
 8. James M. Decker, "Reassessing Charles Brockden Brown's *Clara Howard*," *Publications of the Missouri Philological Association* 19 (1994): 30, 31; Burgett 127, 132.
 9. Jared Gardner, "The Literary Museum and the Unsettling of the Early American Novel," *ELH* 67 (2000): 750, 757, 762.
 10. For a different consideration of the connection between aesthetics and politics in Brown's earlier novels, see Edward Cahill, "An Adventurous and Lawless Fancy: Charles Brockden Brown's Aesthetic State," *Early American Literature* 36.1 (2001): 31–70.
 11. Cynthia S. Jordan, *Second Stories: The Politics of Language, Form, and Gender in Early American Fictions* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1989), 80; Watts 51. "A Series of Original Letters" was originally published in *The Weekly Magazine* in 1798. The unfinished "Henrietta Letters" and "Jessica and Sophia" both went unpublished until the twentieth century. Brown's text "A Series of Original Letters" appears in *The Rhapsodist and Other Uncollected Writings by Charles Brockden Brown*, ed. Harry R. Warfel (New York: Scholars' Facsimiles, 1943), 101–31; his "Henrietta Letters" in *Charles Brockden Brown: Pioneer Voice of America*, by David Lee Clark (Durham: Duke UP, 1952), 55–107; and his "Jessica and Sophia" in *The Late Charles Brockden Brown*, 1815, by Paul Allen (Columbia: Faust, 1976), 108–69.
 12. See, for example, Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1982) and the extremely influential Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987). For a fine reading of epistolarity in Charles Brockden Brown and other early American novelists, see Verhoeven. Several critics have studied Brown's "unsatisfying narrative endings" (Jordan 78), or "loose ends" (Russell Reising, *Loose Ends: Closure and Crisis in the American Social Text* [Durham: Duke UP, 1996]), particularly in *Wieland*.
 13. Christopher Castiglia and Julia Stern, introduction, *Interiority in Early American Literature*, ed. Castiglia and Stern, special issue of *Early American Literature* 37.1 (2002): 3. For another discussion of the relationship between

narrative temporality and subjectivity, see Kathleen Donegan, "As Dying, Yet Behold We Live': Catastrophe and Interiority in Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*," *Early American Literature* 37.1 (2002): 9–37. Like most of the other essays collected in this special issue of *Early American Literature* on interiority, Donegan's emphasizes the self-alienation of the *individualized* subject, leaving open the question of how the intersubjective relations that helped determine and constrain early American selves might have further complicated notions of historical and narrative time.

14. Charles Brockden Brown, *Clara Howard; in a Series of Letters* (with Jane Talbot; a Novel), ed. Sydney J. Krause, S. W. Reid, and Donald A. Ringe (1801; Kent: Kent State UP, 1986), 11. Subsequent references to *Clara Howard* appear parenthetically.
15. Sharon Harris, introduction, *American Women Writers to 1800*, ed. Sharon M. Harris (New York: Oxford UP, 1996), 26; Charles Brockden Brown, "Letters to Elizabeth Linn," Feb. 17–Apr. 29, 1801, TS by John Holmes, Univ. of Texas. I thank John Holmes for sharing with me his transcriptions of the February–April 1801 letters from Brown to Linn, and Mark Kamrath for bringing these letters to my attention and into my mailbox. Brown's record of Linn's own epistolary deferral, her refusal to participate in letter exchange, warrants its own attention and offers a fascinating glimpse into the dynamics of power, gender, and print in the Brown-Linn relationship and in courtship correspondence more generally.
16. Jordan 81.
17. Charles Brockden Brown, *Edgar Huntly; or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker*, ed. Norman S. Grabo (New York: Penguin, 1988), 5–6; emphases added; Charles Brockden Brown, "The Man at Home," *The Rhapsodist and Other Uncollected Writings by Charles Brockden Brown*, ed. Harry R. Warfel (New York: Scholars' Facsimiles, 1943), 43; emphasis added.
18. See, for example, Grabo 129–30.
19. Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2000), 1, 219.
20. Thus Bruce Burgett's attention to the masochistic quality of Edward's sentimental suffering might well be extended to include the novel's readers, whatever their gender.
21. Burgett notes, too, this series of deferrals that appear as "gaps . . . in the otherwise happy ending" (117).
22. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 1, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Cambridge: MIT, 1986), 150, 122, 118.
23. From the interview by Michael Landmann, "Talking with Ernst Bloch: Korcula, 1968," *Telos* 25 (1975): 165–85, qtd. in Jack Zipes, "Introduction: Toward a Realization of Anticipatory Illumination," *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, by Ernst Bloch, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge: MIT, 1988), xxvi.
24. See, for example, Robert S. Levine, "Arthur Mervyn's Revolutions," *Studies in American Fiction* 12.2 (Autumn 1984): 145–60; Paul Downes, "Sleep-Walking out of the Revolution: Brown's *Edgar Huntly*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29.4 (1996): 413–31; Scott Bradfield, *Dreaming Revolution: Transgression in the Development of American Romance* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1993); William Hedges, "Charles Brockden Brown and the Culture of Contradictions," *Early American Literature* 9.2 (Fall 1972): 107–42; Christophersen; and Berthoff.

25. The other seven letters are written by or to Mary Wilmot. I do not include in this enumeration letters embedded within other letters, or the introduction, which is itself a brief letter offering the "pacquet" (3) of letters that makes up the novel to an unnamed reader/recipient.
26. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1 (1835; New York: Vintage, 1990), 45.